

# Book Review: How Immigrants Impact Their Homelands

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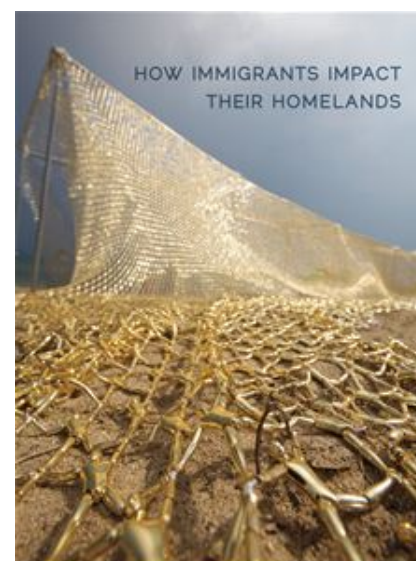
***How Immigrants Impact Their Homelands** seeks to examine the range of economic, social, and cultural impacts that immigrants have had, both knowingly and unknowingly, in their home countries. With case studies from China, India, Cuba, Mexico, the Philippines, Mozambique, and Turkey, this book will appeal to students interested in populations, labour markets, and the everyday realities of migration. Reviewed by **Anthony Oruna-Goriañoff**.*



**How Immigrants Impact Their Homelands. Susan Eckstein and Adil Najam. Duke University Press. May 2013.**

## Find this book:

Although it has been an on-going feature in human history, immigration has grown in scale and significance since the mid 1980s. Thus far, most studies have concentrated on how people coming from the 'global South' adapt to life in the 'global North'. However, in *How Immigrants Impact Their Homelands*, edited by [Susan Eva Eckstein](#) and [Adil Najam](#), several authors explore the positive and negative effects that transnational engagements between countries and their populations have on the emitting countries. This is a rich area for investigation, from returning workers having gained a more modern work ethic – as well as increased expectations from their employees and jobs – to the more negative aspects such as the depopulation of regions, the 'brain drain' of some countries, the effect on families when one parent or both emigrate, and even how a particular subculture can be exported, redefined, and imported back to the place of origin.



SUSAN ECKSTEIN & ADIL NAJAM, EDITORS

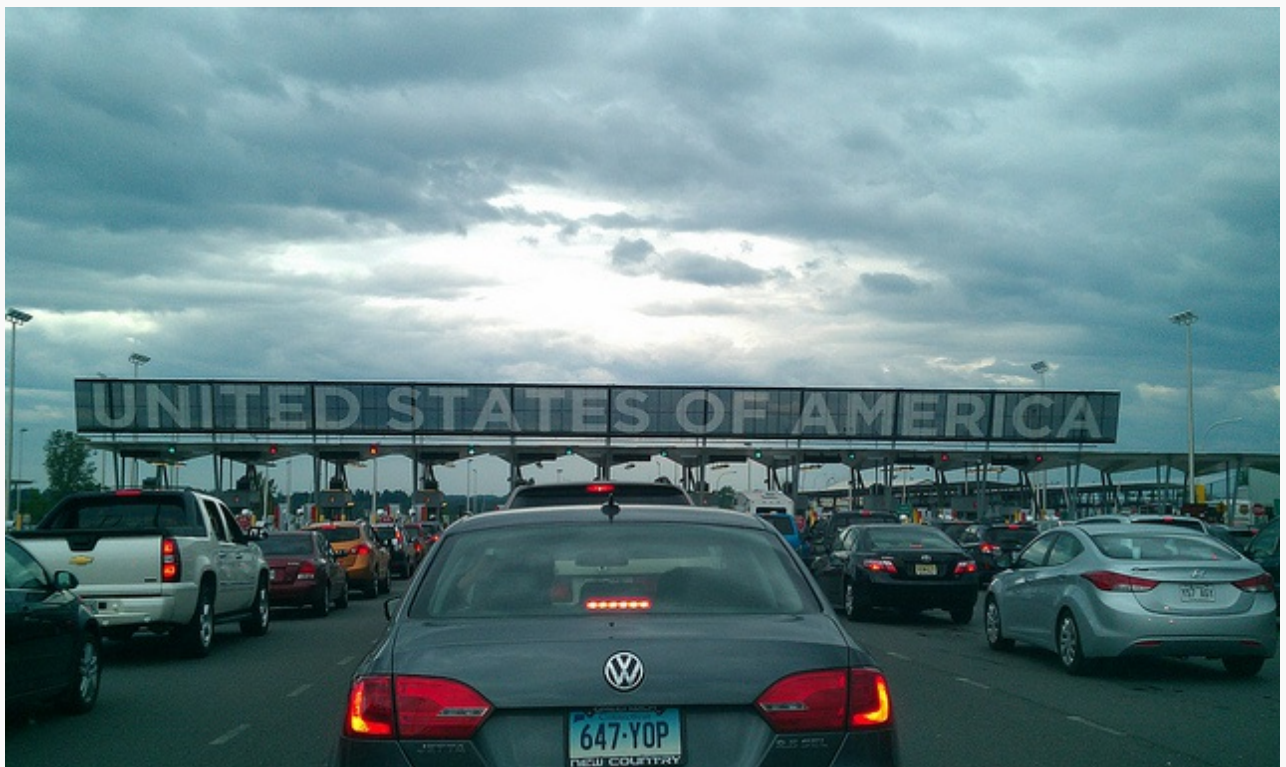
In the book's first chapter, Eckstein delves into some of the ways in which transnational engagements may transform the communities and countries left behind, emphasising that their impact may be political, social as well as cultural. Today, around 75% of global immigrants were born in developing countries but the differences as to *why* people immigrate can be very disparate. In the case of Mexico, economics and the chance for a better life push people to leave their country, whereas in the case of China, depending on the time-frame one looks at, the reasons may be political as well as financial. According to Eckstein, countries such as Cuba and El Salvador have had waves of immigration which range from poverty to revolution, to civil war, to personal security. These last two examples illustrate that the motives for immigration may be mixed and can change over time.

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Thanks to technological advances, immigrants have never had as great and diverse an impact on their home countries as they do today and Eckstein argues that they can have a positive impact on their homeland since they have become 'agents of globalization': people who transmit foreign ideas and practices learned abroad. One example would be what is called the 'brain circulation' which has occurred between India and the US, whereby India invested heavily on educating its human capital based partially on US immigration policy. In this instance, educated Indians were given skilled-worker visas and allowed to live in the US for up to 6 years. Return immigrants, some who had accumulated large fortunes in the US, returned home and helped develop the country's IT sector, keeping it closely related to Silicon Valley. India's success abroad generated economic and social capital for software service markets for Indian companies, who, in turn, benefitted from low-wages and a highly skilled labour force.

However, the impact on the home country can be devastating, as José Miguel Cruz points out in chapter 10. Here Cruz looks at the social impact return immigrants have had in El Salvador. According to him, the socio-economic conditions of El Salvador, as well as the allure of a glamorous foreign culture, served to instil US gang culture by return and deported immigrants, and contributed to a surge in crime and public insecurity in the country. In the case of El Salvador, the trans-nationalisation of American gang life rested on returnee's integrating into pre-existing gangs and the glamorous appeal of US gang culture and lifestyle to the country's marginalised population. It has entailed what Peggy Levitt calls 'social remittances', that is "ideas, behaviours, identities and social capital that flow from host-to-sending-country communities." These social remittances transformed how Central American gangs operated within their societies and towards their law-enforcement institutions.



USA Border Crossing. Credit: [dontdothisathome](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

However, as Cruz points out, social remittances do not flow in a unidirectional way from host country to home country. Gang life norms and warfare were transformed and disseminated within the region, although they were not successfully implemented in every country –Mexico and Nicaragua being two very important examples of domestic rejection. Moreover, these new transnational identities were then exported back to the US, thus showing how social remittances are not always fixed.

But it isn't just crime which can devastate a country. Increased immigration can also empty out entire regions and contribute to a country's underdevelopment. In chapter 3, Alejandro Portes points out that several scholars from the global South have become "fierce critics of out-migration and its consequences for their nations". For them, it is not only a symptom of under-development, it is also its cause.

Large-scale immigration also permits governments to "escape their responsibilities by relying on immigrant remittances." Portes points to two separate economic schools of thought concerning migration. First there is the orthodox economic position which argues that these movements are a natural balance mechanism between "labour-surplus regions" and those which are in need of workers. People such as B. Thomas and A. Lewis believe that migration helps both regions.

However, according to the second school, the 'New Economics of Migration', the reasons for these flows are different. Here they are seen as an alternative to imperfect "credit and futures markets" in rural areas and as "insurance against unforeseen economic downturns."

Here, remittances have always had a positive effect because they “stimulate demand that is met by domestic production.” Nevertheless, Portes stresses that this school neglects the fact that continuous out-migration can depopulate entire regions of their able-bodied population (or, as in the case of many Caribbean countries, its educated citizens) and thus weaken their productive structure. Often these areas can become ghost towns where only the old and infirm live – Portes mentions that almost 50% of Mexico’s municipalities “report having lost population during the last intercensal period”.

The general message of the book is that the best way forward for successful migration is for governments to work together with each other, and with their populations, to take advantage of the opportunities of transnationalism in an equation where they all benefit. From immigrants who help fund massive national development programmes at home, as Morocco or China have experienced, to programmes which allow for cyclical labour flows, whereby an individual’s experience abroad will serve to benefit his/her home country once they return, it is now believed that governments should work in unison to ensure the best outcome when it comes to immigration policies, one which will benefit both the host country as well as the home country.

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